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ABSTRACT

Many Native Americans do not plan on attending college. In fact, many of them drop out of school to find work. Culturally sensitive, comprehensive school-to-work transition programs could greatly benefit the Native American population. Counselors need education in areas of Native American culture and customs. Counselors can build rapport with students by asking them about their heritage and allowing them to express their ideas and beliefs. Counselors should be aware that the strong bond to family that is characteristic of Native Americans often results in individuals taking a lesser job closer to home. For many Native Americans, decisions concerning one family member must go through proper channels in the family and tribe. School counselors should keep this in mind when determining who should be involved in the child's vocational preparation. Although it is important to understand the problems of Native Americans, counselors should emphasize the positive values of Native American culture. Increased cooperation between tribes, employers, educators, and the community will facilitate the feeling of connectedness that is important to Native Americans. Industry tours, career days, open forums at schools, apprenticeships, mentor programs, and field trips increase student exposure to the workforce, which is often limited because of the rural nature of reservations. A classroom environment that encourages discussion about vocations would also be helpful. Two appendices present graduation and college application rates and serious problems in schools by type of Indian school. (Contains 15 references.) (TD)

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Running head: SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITIONS WITH NATIVE AMERICANS

School-to-Work Transitions with Native American Indians: Implications for Counselors

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School-to-Work Transitions with Native Americans

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief review of the literature regarding the school-to-work transition, to highlight serious deficits of the school-to-work transition with Native Americans, and to delineate future research direction.

Current Problem

Over the past few years, society has begun to take notice of the difficulties that many young adults face while making the transition from a scholastic environment to a working environment. While many schools are offering opportunities for children to learn more about the process, the main focus of the training that students receive is in the area of college entrance programs (Clinton, 1991). These college prep classes and programs are important for the graduating seniors planning to further their education, but they offer no benefits to the students that are going directly into an occupational field. These graduates usually end up moving from one temporary job to the next and never receiving the necessary career training imperative for the work force today (Magaziner & Clinton, 1992). Most often the students that do not attend college begin their professional career in the secondary labor market (Smith & Rojewski, 1993). Jobs in this area typically require few skills, offer little or no chance for advancement, and are low paying. These kinds of vocations could be described as being any such jobs in the food services, retail departments, or unskilled manual labor. The problem that society faces is clear: How can

we provide our school-age children with the proper education to allow them to get a job immediately out of high school?

Evaluation of Current Methods

The United States government has attempted to make provisions for this problem with the passing of the School-to-Work Opportunity Act in 1994. This legislation sets forth a framework to help provide education about the work force and opportunities for all students. One of the main goals of this act is to get students thinking about possible career options earlier (Kompelin, 1996). By implementing this program in the seventh or eighth grade, students will be able to explore jobs without the pressure of an immediate decision about the rest of their life. An earlier start would also allow the children to develop skills that have been outlined by Fouad (1997), such as self-exploration and decision making so that they can begin to assess what they enjoy and how they can incorporate that into their career choice. Although the School to Work Opportunity Act states that every student should be given an equal chance to further his/her knowledge about the employment setting, some students are still not receiving the education they deserve. Some are being held back due to discrimination in the workplace or educational settings (Hawks & Muha, 1991), while others simply do not have access to a scholastic setting that provides the proper education preparing the young adults for the jump from high school to the labor force.

The Native American population is a prime example of a group that could benefit greatly from a school-to-work program. In 1990, estimated Native American drop out rates were as high as 36% (Bolls, Tan, & Austin, 1997). The unemployment rate for Native Americans living on or adjacent to reservations was 33.5% in 1987, which was five

times that of the total civilian labor force (Martin, 1991). The graduation rate and the college application rate are lowest among schools located on Native American reservations when compared to schools outside of reservations with a smaller enrollment of Native American students (Appendix 1). Not only do the schools with a high percentage of Native American students have a disadvantage because of their high drop out rate and unemployment in the community, but they also must deal with many outside influences which could have an effect on the children. In a survey by the U.S. Department of Education in 1991 (Appendix 2), teachers on reservations viewed issues such as parental drug abuse, poverty, lack of parental involvement, and student absenteeism as being more serious than their non-reservation counterparts. One of the most serious problems faced by these schools are the alarmingly high drop out rates of Native American students. A main contributing factor to this problem is the fact that many students must drop out and go to work in order to help provide for their family. A large majority of Native Americans live at or below the poverty line and in areas that lack the industrial resources to allow the residents to provide for themselves (Martin, 1991). As a result of this, many members of the family are required to get work so that the family can survive. Unfortunately, because many school-age Native Americans are forced into work at such a young age, it severely handicaps their school-based learning potential.

Another aspect which must be addressed is that because many Native American students are not planning on going to college, it makes it all the more difficult for them to understand where they will use information learned in school in the workforce. Because many Native American students realize early on that they will not be attending college and that their career path will include working in factories or retail services, then chances are

they will be less likely to take their education seriously. An obvious answer to this problem would be to provide the interested students with a vocational skill to help them find a job in the labor force. A well developed transition program could help to alleviate some of these problems by giving Native Americans better direction and support in their pursuit of a career.

An evaluation of the literature on the school-to-work transition with Native Americans revealed a definite lack of information on the subject. As a result, many of the career counseling approaches that have been attempted with Native Americans have failed because of an absence of consideration for traditional values and the effects of culture on vocational decisions (Bowman, 1993). Therefore, increased efforts in the research of this topic would definitely lead to an improved understanding of the situation for counselors and educators. In order to give Native American Indians the chances they deserve, a culturally sensitive, comprehensive school-to-work transition program should be formed.

Proposed Solutions

An issue that must be addressed is the lack of counselor education in the area of Native American culture and customs. Herring (1992) calls for an increase in the knowledge of Native American forms of communication, socioeconomic factors, and prior discrimination to give counselors an understanding of some of the factors they must be aware of when counseling. In order to be an effective multicultural counselor, one must be able to understand the varying perspectives between Native Americans and other ethnic groups, as well as differences between Native American groups themselves. There are over 300 different tribes of Native American Indians in North America (Martin, 1991). Each of these tribes are unique in their own way and should be approached as such by the

vocational or school counselor. Counselors should ask the students about their heritage and allow them a chance to express some of their own ideas and beliefs concerning the Native American people. Not only would this contribute to the building of rapport between the counselor or teacher and the student, but it would also assist in showing the student a genuine concern on behalf of the counselor.

An important characteristic common among Native American groups that the counselor should be aware of is the ethnic pride that is so visible in some groups. This pride can be shown in many different ways, but one of the most common is the strong bond that is formed and maintained by the members of the family (Martin, 1991). This bond can have a tremendous effect on the vocational development of a young person. Although there may be limitations to the scope of vocational possibilities available on the reservation, the Native American individual might believe that staying close to home and taking a lesser job is more important than pursuing ambitions elsewhere. Although this could be seen as atypical to some people, to the Native American the safety and continuation of the cohesive family unit is most important.

Another factor that should be taken into consideration in school to work programs for Native American people is the fact that for some families, any decisions that are made concerning one member of the family must go through the proper channels in the family and the respected members of the tribe before a verdict is arrived upon. Sometimes, any influence from outside the family or the tribe may be difficult because of these limitations. This should be explored by the counselor in the school in order to determine who should be involved and informed of the child's vocational preparation.

The Native American people are a proud and distinguished part of the population in America. The counselor should emphasize the positive values of Native American culture instead of focusing on the many hardships that Native Americans have had to endure. However, it is important to understand the problems that have been faced in the past and how these could have a direct effect on the group today.

Another task which would greatly strengthen the school-to-work program concerning the Native American population would be to strengthen the relationship between tribal organizations, employers, educators, and the community. This would facilitate the feeling of connectedness that is important to the Native American people (McCormick & Amundson, 1997). Authors such as Hull and Marsalis (1991) have stressed the need for activities such as industry tours and career day speakers to try to bring the vocational world closer to the students who might have a difficult time getting out and experiencing it themselves. The success of programs such as these are dependent upon the commitment and involvement of the employers and the message that they try to convey to the students. It is important that the counselor stress to employers how increased Native American jobs will benefit the community, individual families, and ultimately the well being of the corporation. If the employers stress the opportunities that are available for Native American people specifically, then the students are more likely to take an interest in the presentation. It may become necessary to hold an open forum at the school in order to get the families of the students involved in the vocational decision making process. By including the entire network in the transition program, this would allow the students to receive the vocational education necessary to succeed while still maintaining loyalty to the family system and the community.

Another practice that would offer great benefits is the use of mentorships, job training, internships, and apprenticeships (Charner, Fraser, Hubbard, Rogers, & Horne, 1995). Many Native American schools are located on reservations or in rural parts of the country where business and industry is scarce (Snipp & Sandefur, 1988). Because of this, the students are getting very limited exposure to the work force. In order to provide students with the needed experiences, it could be necessary for them to travel to different areas in order to gather the knowledge about the work force that is necessary to succeed in a particular vocation.

As stated by Hoyt (1994), an effective apprenticeship program should focus on a few major themes such as: 1) helping clients learn adaptive skills that will enable them to change with change in the work force 2) helping clients to develop a personally meaningful set of work values that will enable them to humanize the workplace for themselves so that they might receive the personal satisfaction that is deserved. The knowledge that is gained by an effective apprenticeship program cannot be taught in the classroom. It is important that students are given the opportunity to experience and learn for themselves what is expected from them and how they deal with the different aspects of a given job. Programs such as internships and apprenticeships would make this possible because it would allow students an opportunity to see firsthand how a real business environment operates in a different setting than the one in which they have become accustomed.

In dealing with the Native American population, the idea of a mentorship program brings with it several complications. The work experience that is available to many of these students is limited due to their location either on the reservation or in a secluded part

of the country. Therefore, it would be necessary to get the students in the program as varied an experience as possible considering the resources available to them. One possible solution would be to try to develop a scheduling of different students at different job sites for varied periods of time in order to get them as diverse an experience as possible. By doing this, each student would obtain as much experience as possible in different settings which would provide the student with the maximum amount of information with which to make a decision concerning his or her vocational path.

Another possible solution to this problem would be to plan field trips to visit vocational sites such as factories or other job sites. Although a day long trip could not really be classified as a mentorship program, it could provide the student with valuable experience as to what a vocational site is like off of the reservation or outside of their immediate area.

Since school-to-work is based on the connection of a scholastic environment to the working environment, the students should also be provided with an educational setting in which they are able to attain further knowledge about vocations. In a classroom situation, the students are able to ask a teacher any questions they might have encountered during the job training, as well as any general questions that they might have. This environment would provide them with a chance to talk with other students and learn about their experiences on the job. In some cases, it is easier for the student to get advice or ask questions to another student rather than a teacher or counselor. An open format, such as this, is very important in order to give the students a place to voice their opinion and discuss other points of view as well.

Conclusion

In order to be successful, an ethnically aware, multi-dimensional approach to the school-to-work transition is necessary and certainly would be most beneficial to Native Americans. By addressing the cultural aspects, as well as the vocational and educational components of this specific population, the students would be provided with an environment that is very conducive to learning about the work setting.

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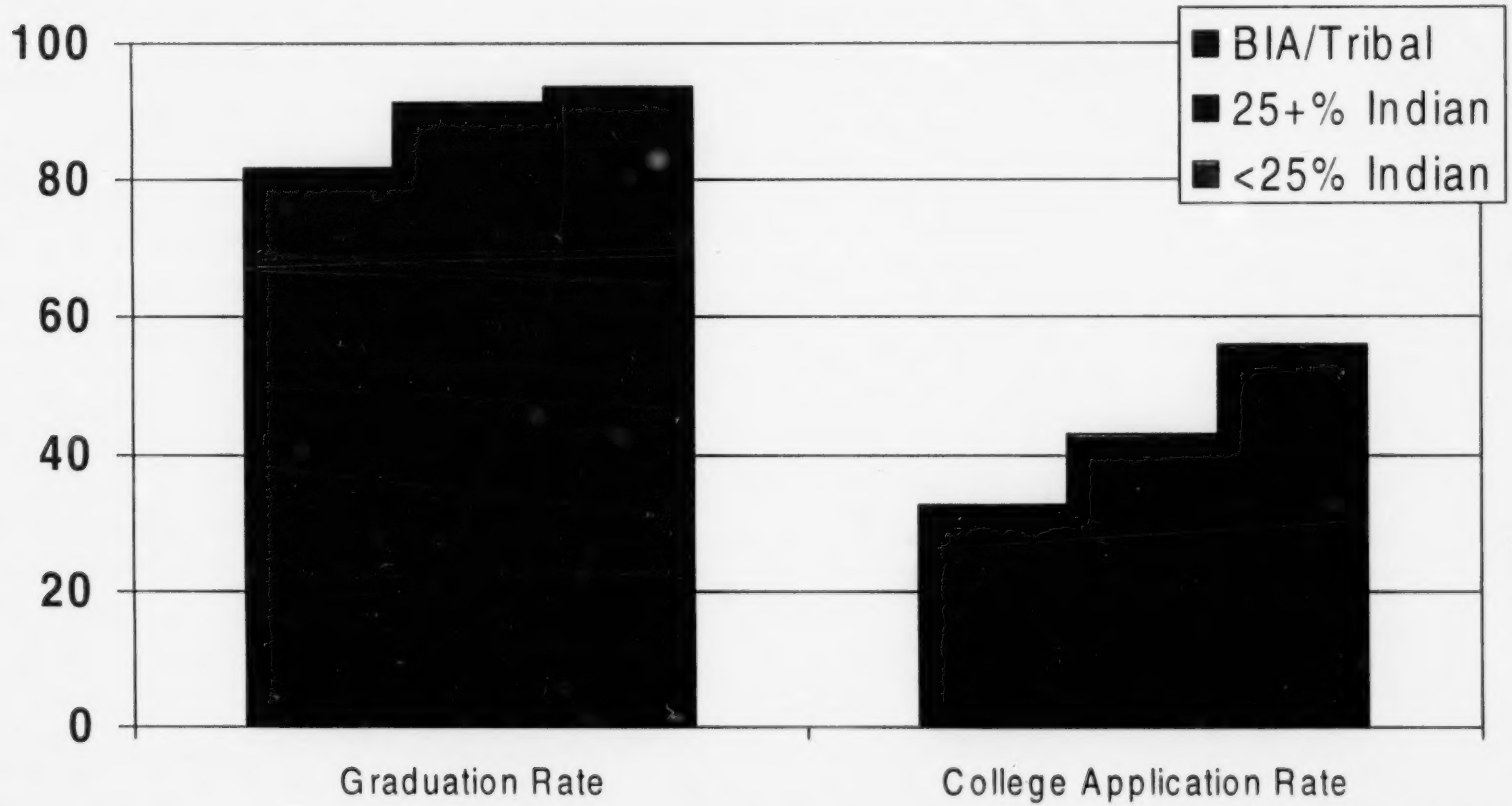
Appendix 1: Graduation and college application rates by Indian school type (1990-1991)



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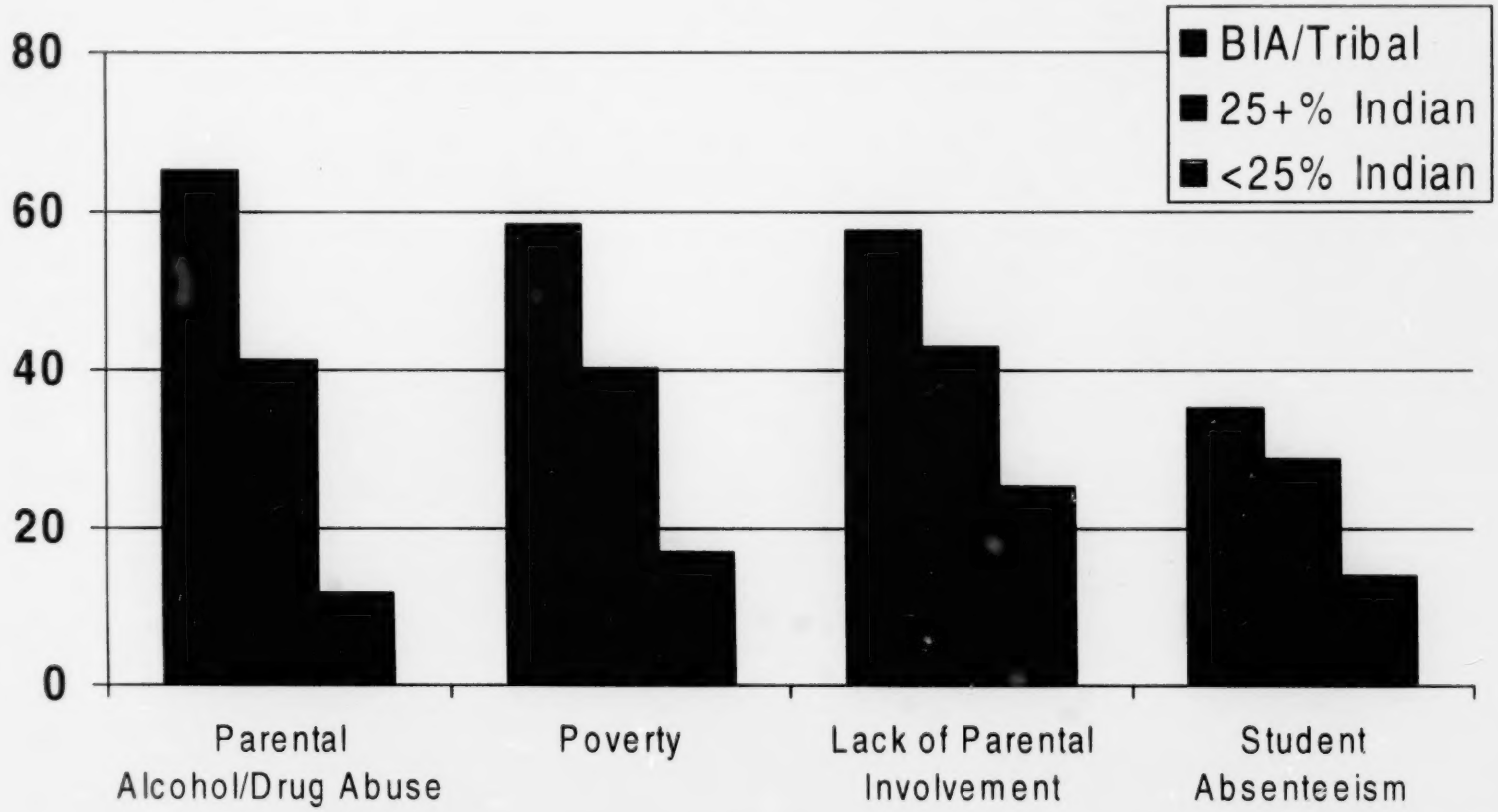
Appendix 2: Percentage of teachers who view certain issues as serious problems in their schools, by Indian school type (1990-1991)



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